

MARXISM AND POETRY

By George Thomson

*Professor of Greek in the University of Birmingham and formerly
Fellow of King's College, Cambridge*

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FOREWORD

GEORGE THOMSON tells us that the poetry he knows best is English, Greek and Irish. His knowledge of the last may come as a surprise to those who know him only as a classical scholar. It should therefore be stated that before he taught Greek through the medium of English in Birmingham he taught it through the medium of Irish in Galway. He is also acquainted with the poetry of many other tongues ancient and modern, as this essay will in part reveal. It is the editor's business to stress this fact as it is of crucial significance for the success of his essay. Marxism provides an extraordinarily powerful instrument of analysis, but this makes it all the more necessary that the material on which it is employed should be rich and abundant. Into this essay, which is written in a clear straightforward style, have been distilled the conclusions drawn from years of arduous research in many fields. The wealth of information on which it is based and the vigour of the handling lift it to the highest level of contemporary criticism. It is both deeply felt and boldly argued. All is not well with our poetry. George Thomson is not one of those who think this sick plant can be restored to health by tending the branches. He has gone to the roots.

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PREFACE

THIS is the substance of a course of public lectures which I gave recently in Birmingham. Some of the material is taken from my *Jerchylus and Athens*, and most of the remainder will appear in my next book. So I have given only the minimum of references.

Those who have read Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality* will not need to be told how deeply I am indebted to his work, but since it is not as widely known, even among Marxists, as it should be, I take this opportunity of drawing attention to his outstanding contribution to creative Marxism.

GEORGE THOMSON

TO D M GARMAN

MARXISM AND POETRY

I SPEECH AND MAGIC

THE subject of this essay is the origin and evolution of poetry. This is a problem of sociology, psychology and linguistics, and it will be treated as such. To those who are content to enjoy poetry for its own sake this programme may sound unattractive, but my experience is that, studied scientifically, poetry is more, not less, enjoyable. To enjoy it fully, we must understand what it is. And to understand what it is we must inquire how it has come into being and grown up. Further, I believe that from the study of primitive poetry we can learn some useful lessons concerning the future of our own poetry. How far these claims are justified the reader will judge for himself. For the present I will explain what led me to adopt this attitude and then proceed to the subject.

The poetry I know best is English, Greek, and Irish. This combination was fortuitous. But it so happens that Greek and English are perhaps the finest examples of civilised poetry, ancient and modern, while Irish, though not so old as Greek, is in some ways more primitive. So these three provided me with a long historical perspective.

One of the most striking differences between Greek and English poetry is that in ancient Greece poetry was wedded to music. There was no purely instrumental music—music without words, and a great deal of the finest poetry was composed for musical accompaniment. In Irish, too, there is a close union between poetry and music. And here it is not just a matter of inference. It is still a living reality. I shall never forget the first time I heard some of the Irish poems I had long known in print sung by an accomplished peasant singer in the traditional style. It was an entirely new experience to me. I had never heard anything like it, in poetry or music.

Irish poetry has another characteristic, also new to me, and it impressed me very deeply. To most English people English poetry is a closed book. They neither know nor care about it. And even the few that take an interest in it—there are not many even of these of whom it can be said that poetry enters largely into their daily lives. Among the Irish peasantry it is quite different.

For them poetry has nothing to do with books at all. Most of them are illiterate. It lives on their lips. It is common property. Everybody knows it. Everybody loves it. It is constantly bubbling up in everyday conversation. And it is still creative. Whenever a notable event occurs, a song is composed to celebrate it. I say composed, but the word is hardly applicable. These songs are not composed in our sense of the word. They are improvised. In many Irish villages there was till recently a trained traditional poet, who had the gift of producing poems, often in elaborate verse forms—far more elaborate than ours in modern English—on the inspiration of the moment. In the village I knew best there was a famous poet, who died about forty years ago. His poems were nearly all improvised and occasional. I remember being told by his family how on the night he died he lay in bed with his head propped on his elbow pouring out a continuous stream of poetry.

Turning back after these experiences to Greek poetry, I could not help asking myself the question, did the ancient Greek poets—Aeschylus or Pindar, for example—compose their poetry like ours, with pen, paper and deliberation, or did they compose like that illiterate Irish poet, in a sort of trance?

This man was, of course, exceptionally gifted. He was a professional poet, one who had studied his craft under some poet of the preceding generation. But I soon found that no sharp line could be drawn between the professional poet and the rest of the community. It was only a matter of degree. To some extent they were all poets. Their conversation is always tending to burst into poetry. Just as extant poetry is more widely known than it is in our society, so the ordinary person is something of a poet. Let me give an example—one out of many.

One evening, strolling through this village, perched high up over the Atlantic, I came to the village well. There I met a friend of mine, an old peasant woman. She had just filled her buckets and stood looking out over the sea. Her husband was dead, and her seven sons had all been 'gathered away', as she expressed it, to Springfield, Massachusetts. A few days before a letter had arrived from one of them, urging her to follow them, so that she could end her days in comfort and promising to send the passage money if only they could agree. All this she told me in detail, and described her life—the trudge to the turf stack in the hills, the

loss of her hens, the dark, smoky cabin, then she spoke of America as she imagined it to be—an Eldorado where you could pick up gold on the pavements, and the railway journey to Cork, the transatlantic crossing, and her longing that her bones might rest in Irish soil. As she spoke, she grew excited, her language became more fluent, more highly coloured, rhythmical, melodious, and her body swayed in a dreamy, cradle-like accompaniment. Then she picked up her buckets with a laugh, wished me goodnight, and went home.

This unpremeditated outburst from an illiterate old woman with no artistic pretensions had all the characteristics of poetry. It was inspired. What do we mean when we speak of a poet as inspired?

As these questions took shape in my mind, I realised that I was becoming involved in the whole problem of the origin of poetry, and I decided that the only thing to do was to study it methodically. It is the results of this study, so far as I have carried it, that will be given in this essay.

Primitive poetry cannot be studied in the written literatures of the past, because by its nature it is unwritten, preliterate. Only in exceptional conditions is it ever written down. It must be studied as it still lives on the lips of savages at the present day. But we cannot understand the poetry of these peoples unless we know something about their society. Further, poetry is a special form of speech. If we are to study the origin of poetry, we must study the origin of speech. And this means the origin of man himself, because speech is one of his distinctive characteristics. We must go right back to the beginning.

We are still a long way from understanding fully how man came into existence, but there is one fundamental point on which scientists are agreed. Man is distinguished from the animals by two main characters—tools and speech.¹

The primates differ from the lower vertebrates in being able to stand upright and use their forefeet as hands. This development, involving a progressive refinement of the motor organs of the brain, arose from the special conditions of their environment. They were forest animals, and life in trees demands agility, close co-ordination of sight and touch, binocular vision, and delicate muscular control. And, once developed, the hands presented the brain with new problems, new possibilities. Thus, from the

beginning there was an integral connection between hand and brain

Man differs from the anthropoid apes, the next highest of the primates, in being able to walk as well as stand. It has been suggested that he learnt to walk as a result of deforestation, which forced him to the ground. Be that as it may, the main point is that in him the division of function between hands and feet was completed. His toes lost their prehensility, his fingers attained a degree of dexterity unknown among the apes. Apes can manipulate sticks and stones, but only human hands can fashion them into tools.

This step was decisive. It opened up a new mode of life. Equipped with tools, he produced his means of subsistence instead of merely appropriating it. Instead of just grabbing what nature offered him, he dug the earth, planted it, watered it, gathered the crop, ground the seeds, and made bread. He used his tools to control nature. And in struggling to control it he became conscious of it as something governed by its own laws, independent of his will. He learnt how things happen, and so how to make them happen. As he came to recognise the objective necessity of natural laws, he acquired the power of operating them for his own ends. He ceased to be their slave and became their master.

On the other hand, in so far as he failed to recognise the objective necessity of natural laws, he treated the world around him as though it could be changed by an arbitrary act of will. This is the basis of magic. Magic may be described as an illusory technique supplementing the deficiencies of the real technique, or, more exactly, it is the real technique in its subjective aspect. A magical act is one in which savages strive to impose their will on their environment by mimicking the natural process that they desire to bring about. If they want rain, they perform a dance in which they imitate the gathering clouds, the clap of thunder, the falling shower. Even in this country we still hear from time to time of somebody in some out-of-the-way district making a wax image of an enemy and sticking pins into it or melting it over the fire. That is magic. The desired reality—the destruction of the person disliked—is enacted in mimicry.²

In its initial stages the labour of production was collective. Men had to work together. And in these conditions the use of tools produced a new mode of communication. The cries of

animals are severely limited in scope. In man they became articulate. They were elaborated and systematised as a means of co-ordinating the movements of the labouring group. And so in inventing tools man invented speech. Again we see the connection between hand and brain.

If we watch a child trying for the first time to use a toy hammer, we can form some idea of the tremendous mental effort that must have been involved in the earliest attempts to use tools. The group worked together, like children in a kindergarten orchestra, and each movement of hand or foot, each stroke on stick or stone, was timed by a more or less inarticulate recitative uttered by all in unison. Without this vocal accompaniment the work could not be done. And so speech emerged as part of the actual technique of production³.

As human skill improved, the vocal accompaniment ceased to be a physical necessity. The workers became capable of working individually. But the collective apparatus did not disappear. It survived in the form of a rehearsal, which they performed before beginning the real task—a dance in which they reproduced the collective, co-ordinated movements previously inseparable from the task itself. This is the mimetic dance as still practised by savages today.

Meanwhile speech developed. Starting as a directive accompaniment to the use of tools, it became language as we understand it—a fully articulate, fully conscious mode of communication between individuals. In the mimetic dance, however, it survived as the spoken part, and there it retained its magical function. And so we find in all languages two modes of speech—common speech, the normal, everyday means of communication between individuals, and poetical speech, a medium more intense, appropriate to collective acts of ritual, fantastic, rhythmical, magical.

If this account is correct, it means that the language of poetry is essentially more primitive than common speech, because it preserves in a higher degree the qualities of rhythm, melody, fantasy, inherent in speech as such. Of course it is only a hypothesis, but it is supported by what is known of primitive languages. In them we find that the differentiation between poetical and common speech is relatively incomplete.

The conversation of savages has a strongly marked rhythm, which is accompanied by lavish gesticulation, and a lilting melody.

accent In some languages the accent is so musical, and so vital to the meaning, that when a song is composed the tune is largely determined by the natural melody of the spoken words And the speaker is always liable to break into quasi-poetical flights of fantasy, like that Irish peasant woman The first two of these characteristics cannot be illustrated here, but the last one can

A Swiss missionary was once camping in Zululand close to the Umbosi railway For the natives the Umbosi railway signifies the journey to Durban, Ladysmith, Johannesburg—the journey made year after year by the boys of the kraal, driven from home by the poll-tax to wear out their youth in the mines, and by the girls too, who suffer many of them an even worse fate in the back-street brothels One of the servants was in the camp cleaning the pots, when he was overheard muttering these words

*The one who roars in the distance,
The one who crushes the young men and smashes them,
The one who debauches our wives
They desert us, they go to the town to live bad lives
The ravisher! And we are left alone**

Here is another artless soliloquy It is only an old black servant mumbling to himself, and yet it is poetry The train catches his attention He forgets the pots Then he forgets the train It ceases to be a train and becomes a symbol for the force that is destroying all he holds most dear The dumb resentment of his subconscious being finds a voice Then the roar of the train dies away, and he returns to his pots

Thus, the common speech of these savages is rhythmical, melodic, fantastic to a degree which we associate only with poetry And if their common speech is poetical, their poetry is magical The only poetry they know is song, and their singing is nearly always accompanied by some bodily action And its function is magical It is designed to effect some change in the external world by mimesis—to impose illusion on reality

The Maoris have a potato dance The young crop is liable to be blasted by east winds, so the girls go into the fields and dance, simulating with their bodies the rush of wind and rain and the growth and blossoming of the crop, and as they dance they sing, calling on the crop to follow their example⁵ They enact in fantasy the fulfilment of the desired reality That is magic—an illusory technique supplementary to the real technique But though

to celebrate the realisation of communal desires. But the celebration still carries with it the echoes of an incantation. Poetry has grown out of magic.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art! Why do poets crave for the impossible? Because that is the essential function of poetry, which it has derived from magic. In the wild transport of the mimetic dance the hungry, frightened savages express their weakness in the face of nature by a hysterical act of extreme mental and physical intensity, in which they lose consciousness of the external world, the world as it really is, and plunge into the subconscious, the inner world of fantasy, the world as they long for it to be. By a supreme effort of will they endeavour to impose illusion on reality. In this they fail, but the effort is not wasted. Thereby the psychical conflict between them and their environment is resolved. Equilibrium is restored. And so, when they return to reality, they are actually more fit to grapple with it than they were before.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art! Remember the circumstances. Keats was twenty-four, on his way to Italy in a last effort to recover his health. He had seen Fanny Brawne for the last time. Down the Channel his ship was driven by bad weather into Lulworth Cove, where he went ashore—his last walk on English soil. He returned to the ship in the evening, and it was then he composed this sonnet and wrote it out in a copy of Shakespeare's poems. Four months later he died in Italy of consumption.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art!

This is a conscious wish—the wish of a dying man. But already it is charged with poetical memories.

*But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fix'd and resting quality
There is no fellowe in the firmament.*

This sets his own fantasy in motion, as though a spring had been released. His imagination soars. He identifies himself with the star, and then with the moon. From the beginning of human history the moon has been an object of mystical worship as a symbol of everlasting life. And from the moon, still faintly conscious of the ship rocking gently in the swell that is running into the Cove,

Here, instead of a statement confusing fact with fancy, we have a command. But the command is not addressed directly to the persons concerned. It is conveyed through the compelling magic of the song. The song is externalised as a supernatural force.

My next example is a German foresters' song

*Klinge du, klinge du, Waldung,
Schalle du, schalle du, Halde,
Halle wider, halle wider, Hainlein,
Töne wider, grosser Laubwald,
Wider meine gute Stimme,
Wider meine goldne Kehle,
Wider mein Lied, das lieblichste!
Wo die Stimme zu verstehen ist,
Werden bald die Büsche brechen,
Schichten sich von selbst die Stämme,
Stapeln sich von selbst die Scheiter,
Fügen sich zum Hof die Klafter,
Häufen sich im Hof die Schuber
Ohne junger Männer Zutun,
Ohne die geschärften Aexte!¹⁰*

The foresters call on the trees to fall to the ground, break up into logs, roll out of the forest and stack themselves in the yard in answer to their singing. This is poetry. They know very well that all this is not going to happen, but they like to fancy that it will, because it helps them in their work. Poetry has grown out of magic.

My next is an Old Irish mantic poem

*Good tidings sea fruitful, wave-washed strand, smiling woods,
witchcraft flees, orchards blossom, cornfields ripen, bees swarm,
a cheerful world, peace and plenty, happy summer!¹¹*

It was chanted by a prophet as an augury of a good season. The desired reality is described as though already present.

And so by almost imperceptible degrees we reach a type of poetry with which we are all familiar

*Summer is come in,
Lhude sing cuccu!
Groweth seed and bloweth mead
And springeth the wude nu—
Sing cuccu!*

The statement here is a statement of fact, but even here it is accompanied by a command. These seasonal songs, which have deep roots in the life of the European peasantry, were composed

man has made of it. I am going to argue that human rhythm originated from the use of tools

We all know that, when children are learning to write, they often roll the tongue in time with the hand, or even pronounce the words aloud—not because there is anyone to listen but to help the fingers guide the pen. The movement is quite inadvertent. What actually happens is that there is a 'spread' from the motor organs of the hand to the adjacent area of the brain, which controls the tongue. As the child improves with practice, the spread is eliminated.

Similarly, when a man is doing heavy work, such as lifting a log or stone, he pauses before the height of each muscular effort for an intake of breath, which he holds by closing the glottis, then, as he relaxes after the effort, the glottis is forced open by the pent-up air, causing a vibration of the vocal chords—an inarticulate grunt.

Children, like savages, tend to gesticulate when they talk. The function of gesticulation is not merely to help others understand what we are saying. Children gesticulate just as much when talking to themselves. It is instinctive, like the other movements just described. The movement of the vocal organs overlaps, as it were, with the other muscular movements of the body. For us, speech is primary, gesticulation secondary, but it does not follow that this was so with our earliest ancestors.

On the strength of these considerations it was argued half a century ago by Bücher that speech evolved from reflex actions of the vocal organs incidental to the muscular efforts involved in the use of tools. As the hands became more finely articulated, so did the vocal organs, until the awakening consciousness seized on these reflex actions and elaborated them into a socially recognised system of communication.

All this is hypothetical, but the close connection between rhythm and labour is apparent from evidence of a more concrete kind.

We are still familiar, even in western Europe, with labour songs¹³. I mean spinning-songs, reaping-songs, rowing-songs, and so on. Their function is to expedite the labour of production by imparting to it a rhythmical, hypnotic character. The spinner sings in the belief that her song will help the spinning-wheel to go round, and since it helps her to turn it, it does help the spinning-wheel to

he looks down on the movement of the tides creeping to and fro across the contours of this planet

*Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the soft new-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—*

Then, having withdrawn thus into infinity, still responsive to the hypnotic swaying of the ship, he descends, immortalised, to earth

*No, yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—*

But it is impossible There could be no love without death

And so live ever, or else swoon to death

He wakes up It is like a dream stirred by the rocking of the boat But through the dream he has thrown off what was oppressing him He has recovered his peace of mind The world is still objectively the same—the world

If here youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies—

but his subjective attitude to it has changed And so, for him, it is not the same That is the dialectics of poetry, as of magic

II RHYTHM AND LABOUR

My text for this chapter is a sentence from one of Yeats's Essays

The relation between formal music and speech will yet become the subject of science, not less than the occasion of artistic discovery¹²

Rhythm may be defined in its broadest sense as a series of sounds arranged in regular sequences of pitch and 'time. Its ultimate origin is no doubt physiological—perhaps connected with the heart-beat But at that level it is something that man shares with the other animals We are not concerned here with the physical germ of rhythm, whatever it may be, but with what

ballad was originally a dance. It still is in some parts of Europe, like this one from the Faroe Islands.

The precentor sings the ballad and the rhythm is stamped with the feet. The dancers pay close attention to his words, which must come clearly, since the characteristics of the narrative are brought out by the mime. Hands are tightly clasped in the turmoil of battle, a jubilant leap expresses victory. All the dancers join in the chorus at the end of each stanza, but the stanza itself is sung only by one or two persons of special repute²³. The analytical principles of modern musicology belong to the study of rhythm as such—to the common foundation of poetry, music and dancing.

Most of our folk-songs are in binary form, but some are more elaborate. In the Volga Boat Song, for example, the stanza consists of an improvised passage preceded and followed by the verse containing the traditional hauling-cry. In musical terminology, the first subject is followed by a second, and then the first is repeated or resumed. This is ternary form ABA. In skilful hands A₂ becomes something more than a repetition of A₁. It is A₁ in a new form conditioned by B. Thus, ternary form is more organic, more dialectical than binary. That is why it has been so highly cultivated in modern music.

To resume. The three arts of dancing, music and poetry began as one. Their source was the rhythmical movement of human bodies engaged in collective labour. This movement had two components, corporal and oral. The first was the germ of dancing, the second of language. Starting from inarticulate cries designed to mark the rhythm, language was differentiated into poetical speech and common speech. Discarded by the voice and reproduced by percussion with the tools, the inarticulate cries became the nucleus of instrumental music.

The first step towards poetry properly so called was the elimination of the dance. This gives us song. In song, the poetry is the content of the music, the music is the form of the poetry. Then these two diverged. The form of poetry is its rhythmical structure, which it has inherited from song but simplified so as to concentrate on its logical content. Poetry tells a story, which has an internal coherence of its own, independent of its rhythmical form. And so later there emerged out of poetry the prose romance or novel, in which poetical diction has been replaced by common speech.

go round This is very near to magic In particular instances it can be proved that these songs originated as incantations

Labour songs abound at all stages of culture all over the world—except where they have been silenced by the hum of machinery And they have a special importance for our purpose, because in them, with some significant modifications, the original relationship between language and labour has been preserved Let us take some examples

The work of rowing a boat involves a simple muscular operation, repeated at regular intervals without variation The time is marked for the oarsmen by a repeated cry, which in its simplest form is disyllabic *O—op*! The second syllable marks the moment of exertion, the first is a preparatory signal

Hauling a boat is heavier work than rowing, and so the moments of exertion are spaced at longer intervals This leaves room for expansion of the preparatory syllable, as in the Irish hauling cry *Ho—lt—ho—hup*! Sometimes the cry ends with a syllable of relaxation, like the Russian hauling cry *E—uch—nyem*! And in many cases it has become partly or wholly articulate *Heave—o—ho*! *Haul away*!

The two elements, variable and constant, which constitute the simple, disyllabic labour cry, can be recognised in the arsis and thesis of prosody, which denote properly the raising and lowering of the hand or foot in the dance And so the ictus or beat of rhythm is rooted in the primitive labour process—the successive pulls at the log, or the strokes of the tool on stick or stone It goes back to the very beginning of human life, to the moment when man became man That is why it stirs us so deeply

The following ditty was recorded by Junod, the Swiss missionary mentioned above, from a Thonga boy, who sang it extempore at the roadside while breaking stones for his European employers

They treat us badly, ehé!
They are hard on us, ehé!
They drink their coffee, ehé!
*And give us none, ehé!*¹⁴

The repeated *ehé* is the labour cry, marking the hammer-strokes This is the constant It is prefaced each time with a few articulate words improvised to express the worker's subjective attitude to his task The song has grown out of the cry, just as the cry has grown out of the work itself

perceptual world, our individuality becomes dormant, giving free play to those basic impulses and aspirations, common to all of us, which in conscious life are socially inhibited. Our dream world is less individualised, more uniform than waking life.

Poetry is a sort of dream world. Let me quote again from Yeats:

The purpose of rhythm is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, by hushing us with an alluring sense of monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of trance, in which the mind, liberated from the pressure of the will, is unfolded in symbols.²⁵

One might quarrel with the word 'liberated', but that does not matter now. The language of poetry, being rhythmical, is hypnotic. Not so hypnotic as to send us to sleep altogether. If we analyse any metre in any language, we find in it precisely that combination of monotony and variety, that interplay of like and unlike, which, as Yeats perceived, is needed to hold the mind suspended in a sort of trance, the special spell of poetry, caught between sleep and waking in the world of fantasy.

And so, when we say a poet is inspired, we mean that he is more at home than other men in this subconscious world of fantasy. He is exceptionally prone to psychical dissociation. And through this process the conflicts in his psyche—the contradictions in his relationship to society—are discharged, relieved. The discords of reality are resolved in fantasy. But, since this world into which he retires is less individualised than his conscious life, since it is common to him and his fellow men, the poetry in which he formulates his experience of it evokes a general response, striking a chord in every heart, expressing what his fellows feel but cannot express for themselves, and so drawing them all into a closer communion of imaginative sympathy.²⁶

*Und wenn der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt,
Gab mir ein Gott, zu sagen, wie ich leide.²⁷*

*And when man in his agony is dumb,
I have God's gift to utter what I suffer*

They are tormented by unsatisfied longings which they cannot explain, cannot express. He too is unable to explain them, but thanks to the gift of inspiration he can at least express them. And

Central Africa, where it was sung one evening round the camp fire by the porters attached to a white man's caravan

*The wicked white man goes from the shore—puti, puti!
We will follow the wicked white man—puti, puti!
As long as he gives us food—puti, puti!
We will cross the hills and streams—puti, puti!
With this great merchant's caravan—puti, puti!²⁰*

And so on till they fell asleep. The improvisations were rendered in turn by individuals, while the repeated *puti* (which is said to mean 'grub') was sung by all in unison. This gives us the familiar, universal structure of solo and chorus. The labour cry is now nothing but a refrain.

Severed from the labour process, the constant too is expanded. It becomes fully articulate, and is varied so as to diversify the rhythmical pattern, but without destroying entirely the sense of regular repetition, on which its unity depends.

*Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,
Edward, Edward?
Whv does your brand sae drop wi' blude,
And why sae sad gang ye, O?
O, I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,
Mither mither,
O, I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,
And I had nae mair but he, O!²¹*

And so we reach the ballad quatrain, in which the refrain has disappeared as such but is still embedded in the rhythmical structure, which rests on a continual alternation of thesis and antithesis, announcement and response.

*There liv'd a lass in yonder dale,
And down in yonder glen O,
And Kathrine Jaffray was her name,
Well known by many men O!²²*

In the ballad measure, the stanza is a musical 'sentence', the couplet a musical 'phrase', the verse a musical 'figure'. There are two figures in each phrase, two phrases in each sentence. The members of each pair are complementary, similar yet different. This is what musicologists call binary form AB.

This musical interpretation of the ballad measure is not merely an analogy. It is the only proper method of analysis. The prosody of our textbooks is as remote from the living history of poetry as conventional grammar is from the living history of language. The

female devotees of Dionysus, who under the influence of music had hysterical seizures, which were explained by saying that they were *enthéoi*—that there was 'a god in them'—the origin of our 'enthusiasm'. At this level we can no longer speak of poetry. We have reached its roots in magic.

Inspiration and possession are the same thing. In primitive society mental disorders involving loss of consciousness and convulsions are attributed to possession by a god or animal or ancestral spirit³³. This idea emanates from the ecstasy of the mimetic dance, in which the performers lose consciousness of their identity as they impersonate the animals or spirits that form the subject of the dance.

Hysteria is a neurosis—a conflict between the individual and his environment which issues in a revolt of the subconscious. It is common among savages—not because they are more prone to such conflicts than we are, but because their consciousness is shallower, less resilient. It is treated by magic. When the first symptoms appear, a song is chanted over the patient. This precipitates the fit, facilitates the psychical dissociation. Here, then, we have poetry at a purely magical level, or rather not poetry at all but the form of therapeutic magic out of which poetry evolved. For magic too is a revolt of the subconscious, cured in the same way. The difference is that in the mimetic dance this hysterical propensity is organised collectively—it is organised mass hysteria, whereas these individual seizures are sporadic. But the treatment is essentially the same. The patient is exorcised. The possessing spirit is evoked and expelled by the magic of the song. The exorcist who administers the treatment—the shaman, medicine-man, or witch-doctor, as he is variously called—is usually himself a hysterical subject who has undergone a special training. The relation of the exorcist to the patient is thus similar to that of the leader to his followers in the mimetic dance.

Prophecy is a development of possession. One of the commonest conditions of exorcising a patient is that the possessing spirit should be forced to reveal its name, and often, after revealing its name, it demands to be propitiated in return for releasing its victim. In this way the procedure becomes a means of proclaiming the will of the gods and so of predicting the future. The hysterical seizure assumes the form of a —

and the rhythmical integument has been shed—except in so far as the story is cast in a balanced, harmonious form.

Meanwhile there has grown up a type of music which is purely instrumental. The symphony is the antithesis of the novel. If the novel is speech without rhythm, the symphony is rhythm without speech. The novel derives its unity from the story it tells, taken from perceptual life, the symphony draws its material entirely from fantasy. It has no internal coherence apart from its form. Hence all those rhythmical principles which have disappeared in the novel have been elaborated in music to an unprecedented degree. They have come to be regarded as the special province of music. We speak of them habitually as 'musical form'. But they can still be traced in poetry—in its content, I mean, not merely its rhythmical form—if we study it with a sense of music. Let us examine two examples, which, besides illustrating the point at issue, will show once again how poetry is related to magic.

Sappho's Ode to Aphrodite is the oldest European lyric. And it is a lyric in the full sense—a song sung to the lyre. Sappho was head of a religious society of young ladies, dedicated to Aphrodite. One of these girls, to whom she is passionately devoted, has failed to reciprocate her love.

*Aphrodite, goddess enthroned in splendour,
Child of Zeus Almighty, immortal, artful,
I beseech thee, break not my heart, O Queen, with sorrow and anguish!
Rather come, O come as I often saw thee,
Quick to hear my voice from afar, descending
From thy Father's mansion to mount thy golden chariot drawn by
Wings of sparrows fluttering down from heaven
Through the cloudless blue, and a smile was shining,
Blessed Lady, on thy immortal lips, as standing beside me
Thou didst ask 'Well, what is it now? what is that
Frantic heart's desire? Do you need my magic?
Whom then must I lure to your arms? Who is it, Sappho, that wrongs
you?*

*On she flies, yet soon she shall follow after,
Gifts she spurns, yet soon she shall be the giver,
Love she will not, yet, if it be your will, then surely she shall love!
So come now, and free me from grief and trouble,
Bringing all to pass as my heart desires it!
Answer, come, and stand at my side in arms, O Queen, to defend me!*

Sappho begins by stating her prayer. She goes on to recall how

female devotees of Dionysus, who under the influence of music had hysterical seizures, which were explained by saying that they were *enthousi*—that there was 'a god in them'—the origin of our 'enthusiasm'. At this level we can no longer speak of poetry. We have reached its roots in magic.

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III IMPROVISATION AND INSPIRATION

WITH us poetry is seldom, if ever, improvised. It is a matter of pen and paper. There must be contemporary poets whose melodies are literally unheard. They have been written down by the poet, printed, published, and read in silence by the individual purchasers. Our poetry is a written art, more difficult than common speech, demanding a higher degree of conscious deliberation.

It is important to remember that this feature of modern poetry is purely modern. In antiquity and the middle ages, and even today among the peasantry, the poet is not divided from his audience by the barrier of literacy. His language is different from common speech, but it is a spoken language, common to him and his audience. He is more fluent in it than they are, but that is only because he is more practised. To some extent they are all poets. Hence the anonymity of most popular poetry. Generated spontaneously out of daily life, it passes, changing colour as it goes, from mouth to mouth, from parents to children, from age to age, until the faculty of improvisation decays. Only then is it brought to rest, and even then it preserves a distinctive quality, which we describe by saying that, however perfect it may be in point of craftsmanship, it lacks the quality of conscious art. That is just what it does lack—the stamp of an individual personality. And inevitably so, because it is the product not of an individual but of a whole community. Civilised poetry is the work of a more highly individualised society.

On the other hand, the function of poetry is still, as always, to withdraw the consciousness from the perceptual world into the world of fantasy. In comparing poetical speech with common speech we saw that it was more rhythmical, fantastic, hypnotic, magical. Now, in our conscious life, all the factors that make up our distinctive humanity—economic, social, cultural—are fully active. Individual differences are at their maximum. Hence, just as the mental processes of conscious life reveal the greatest diversity between individuals, so common speech, which is their

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man differs from the savage in having improved his mode of production so far that it has become possible for a whole section of the community—the ruling class—to live on the labour of the others. Among the ruling class, which has leisure, magic is now applied to less immediate needs. It becomes, on the one hand, science, on the other hand, art. Science springs from its objective aspect—the outward struggle against nature, art springs from its subjective aspect—the inner, psychical struggle. This is the point, therefore, at which poetry emerges out of magic, but it only does so by ceasing to express the aspirations of society as a whole. Society is now divided against itself.

Modern European poetry has three main types—lyric, epic, drama. All of them developed under Greek influence. In developing they have shed some of their primitive features. Greek lyric was song in fact as well as name, Greek epic was recited publicly before a crowd, Greek drama included a singing and dancing chorus.

The masterpieces of Greek epic are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.³⁶ They are composed in the epic hexameter, which consists of a single verse repeated continuously, like our blank verse. The *Iliad* runs to some 15,000 verses, the *Odyssey* to just over 12,000. The *Iliad* tells the story of a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles during the Trojan War, the *Odyssey* tells how another chief, Odysseus, found his way home at the end of the war. What is the connection between poems like these and the primitive complex of song and dance which we have identified as the nucleus of poetry?

These poems were declaimed at religious festivals. The art of reciting them was a profession in itself. The reciters belonged to a guild called the *Homeridae*—‘sons of Homer’. There is reason to believe that in prehistoric times these *Homeridae* had really been what their name implies—a hereditary clan of professional minstrels who handed on their craft from father to son.

The poems were recited, not sung. But it was a custom of the *Homeridae* that during his performance the reciter held in his hand a special sort of staff or wand. And they had a tradition that their founder, Homer, had chanted to the lyre. We infer that the staff was a ritual substitute for the lyre. This is confirmed by the poems themselves, which purport to describe the life of prehistoric times. Phemios and the other minstrels mentioned in

and my heart throbs And whenever I glance down from the platform at the audience, I see them weeping, with a wild look in their eyes, lost in rapture at the words they hear³⁰

For us, when we speak of a poet as inspired, it is only an empty phrase, but when primitive poets are questioned about the nature of their art, they all give the same answer They all claim to be inspired in the true sense of the word—filled with the breath of God Let us turn again to Central Asia I quote from Radlov, one of the pioneers of modern folklore, writing some seventy years ago

A skilled minstrel of the Kirghiz can recite any theme he wants, any story that is desired, extempore, provided only that the course of events is clear to him When I asked one of their most accomplished minstrels whether he could sing this or that song, he answered 'I can sing any song whatever, for God has implanted this gift of song in my heart He gives the words on my tongue without my having to seek them I have learnt none of my songs All springs from my inner self'³¹

We are reminded of Phemios, the minstrel described in the *Odyssey*. 'I am self-taught', he says, 'for God has implanted all manner of songs in my heart'³² And of Caedmon, the Anglo-Saxon poet, who claimed to have learnt his poems from an angel that visited him in dreams³³

For primitive peoples everywhere the poet is a prophet, who being inspired or possessed by a god speaks with the god's voice For the ancient Greeks the connection between prophecy (*mantiké*) and madness (*mania*) was apparent in the words themselves To them the magical origin of poetry and prophecy was self-evident, because the symptoms of both reminded them of the orgiastic dances that survived in their cults of Dionysus I quote again from Plato -

All good poets are enabled to compose not by art but because they are divinely inspired or possessed When they compose, they are no more sane than the Korybantes when they dance As soon as they engage in rhythm and concord, they become distracted and possessed, like the Bacchantes who in their madness draw milk and honey from the streams³⁴

The Korybantes were the Dervishes of Greece—ecstatic dancers devoted to the Anatolian mother-goddess The Bacchantes were

and Nestor The Homeridai began as one among many minstrel clans, but they were exceptionally gifted, and in time they absorbed their rivals

Then came the revival of trade Navigation flourished, new cities sprang up. Everywhere along the trade routes the kings and landed nobles were swept aside by merchant princes at the head of a new class of manufacturers and traders The merchant princes set up courts of their own, to which they invited the leading minstrels of the day, and eventually one of them, Peisistratos of Athens, a descendant of Nestor, arranged for the Iliad and Odyssey to be written down.

The growth of the Iliad and Odyssey is paralleled, as Chadwick has shown, in the history of Germanic epic When we first hear of the Teutonic tribes in Caesar's Commentaries, they are still tribal. In the pages of Tacitus they have perceptibly advanced A few generations later they are carving kingdoms out of the Roman Empire Tacitus tells us that they cultivated ancient songs, in which the deeds of great leaders like Arminius were kept alive These were the nucleus of the Eddas, the Nibelungenlied and Beowulf The many striking resemblances between Greek and Germanic epic—the features which Chadwick calls 'heroic'—are due to the similarities in the social conditions in which the poems were composed³⁷.

Now, having surveyed the evolution of epic poetry, let us consider the poets who produced it what was their technique, and what was their relationship to their audience? The answer must be sought in conditions in which epic is still a living art.

The Kirghiz are today free and equal citizens of the Kirghiz Autonomous Republic, which lies in the Tien Shan Mountains north of the Hindu Kush Before the Revolution of 1917 they were backward, disease-ridden nomads, doomed apparently to extinction, but famous for their poetry The account that follows is from Radlov, who knew them in that state

They were all poets Almost everyone could improvise heroic verse, though only professionals performed in public These travelled the country from one festival to another, accompanying themselves on a two-stringed instrument called a *kōbūz* Every local khan had his own minstrel, whom he employed to commemorate his achievements Their technique is described as follows

end and my heart throbs And whenever I glance down from the platform at the audience, I see them weeping, with a wild look in their eyes, lost in rapture at the words they hear³⁰

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epithets, figurative tropes, and repeated paragraphs to describe such actions as going to bed, getting up, preparing meals, welcoming strangers, harnessing horses, and so on. The presence of such features is proof that Greek and Germanic epic had grown out of conditions such as Radlov has described.

How are we to explain the great superiority of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as works of art, over the *Eddas* and *Beowulf* and other epics? The historical conditions of early Greece were peculiarly favourable to the development of epic. I cannot go into the whole question now, but will deal briefly with a single point—the circumstances in which the poems were committed to writing. The ancient Greeks believed that they were written down at Athens under the supervision of Peisistratos in the latter part of the sixth century B.C. There is every reason to believe that this tradition is correct. But of course writing had been practised throughout Greece long before this. Why were the *Homeridae* so slow to take advantage of it? Because they were so well organised. Their oral tradition was so highly cultivated that they had no use for the pen. They carried their repertoire in their heads. There is nothing surprising in that. The only peculiarity about the oral tradition of the *Homeridae*—and this is the point I am getting at—is that they preserved it down to a time when literacy had become general all round them and had given rise to a written literature and a sense of literary criticism. The result was that, when they did commit their poetry to writing, the work was done very skilfully. History was kind to them.

The distinctive beauty of epic diction, as compared with written poetry, is its fluency and freshness. That is the virtue of improvisation. It takes on new colours as it passes from one festive gathering to another, it sparkles in response to each momentary stimulus. But its lustre is elusive. Its words are winged and cannot be pinned down.

Let us take another lesson from the Kirghiz. Radlov describes his efforts to record their poetry.

In spite of all my efforts I have not succeeded in reproducing their minstrelsy completely. The repeated singing of the same song, the slow dictation, and my frequent interruptions, dispelled the excitement indispensable for good singing. The minstrel could only dictate in a tired, negligent way what he had delivered before with fire³⁹.

sense—a vehicle for the voice of a god or spirit. In this condition he expresses fears, hopes, anticipations of the future, of which in his conscious life he is unaware. We still say that coming events cast their shadows before. They impinge on our subconscious, causing an indefinable unrest, and in the prophet, whose subconscious is abnormally active and so constantly liable to erupt, they rise to the surface.

And finally the prophet becomes a poet. In primitive thought there is no clear line between prophecy and poetry. The minstrels described in the Homeric poems are credited with second sight, and their persons are sacrosanct. The poet is the prophet at a higher level of sublimation. The physical intensity of his symptoms has been mitigated, but it is a trance all the same. His psyche is precipitated into fantasy, in which his subconscious struggles and aspirations find an outlet. And just as the prophet's predictions command general acceptance, so the poet's utterance stirs all hearts.

All this was divined by Goethe. Let me quote the whole passage. It is the Poet speaking:

*Die Träne hat uns die Natur verlichen,
Den Schrei des Schmerzens, wenn der Mann zuletzt
Es nicht mehr trägt, und mir noch über alles,
Sie liess im Schmerz mir Melodie und Rede,
Die tiefste Fülle meiner Not zu klagen
Und wenn der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt,
Gab mir ein Gott, zu sagen, wie ich leide*

*Nature has left us tears, the cry of pain
When man can bear no more, and most of all
To me—she has left me melody and speech
To make the full depth of my anguish known,
And when man in his agony is dumb,
I have God's gift to utter what I suffer*

Next to Shakespeare, Goethe is perhaps the greatest poet of modern Europe. Here he defines the poet's function. He could not have done it better.

IV EPIC

WHAT is civilisation? For our present purpose it will suffice to note that civilisation as we know it down to our own day presupposes the existence of a leisured class. Just as man differs from the ^{beast} in producing his means of subsistence, so civilised

and made in the same way, but in them the qualities inherent in improvised verse were nursed up to the point at which, without losing any of their spontaneity, they blossomed into art. And all this was rendered possible by a unique combination of historical circumstances, which laid a bridge between improvisation and composition, between speech and writing, so that something of the unpremeditated audacity of the primitive minstrel, inspired by the shining eyes and breathless silence of the crowd, was carried over into the impassive but durable medium of the written word.

I remember vividly how my own misunderstandings of Homer came to be cleared up. I read the *Odyssey* first, and like every schoolboy I was thrilled when I came to the line. 'He lay full length in the dust, his horsemanship forgotten'. (That is what it means, but the melody is untranslatable) It struck me as magnificent, inspired. In due course I came across the same line in the *Iliad*. This was disconcerting. If it was really inspired, how did it bear repetition? The editors could only suggest that one passage was an imitation of the other, but that did not comfort me, because in that case the poems were nothing but a patchwork. I was puzzled.

Then I went to Ireland. The conversation of those ragged peasants, as I learnt to follow it, astonished me. It was as though Homer had come alive. Its vitality was inexhaustible, yet it was rhythmical, alliterative, formal, artificial. One day it was announced that a woman had given birth to a child. In the words of my informant, 'She has brought her load from the west'. I recognised the allusion. Often, when turf was scarce, I had watched the women coming down from the hills bent double under packs of heather. What a fine image, I thought, what eloquence! Before the day was out I had heard the same expression from three or four different people. It was common property. After many similar experiences I realised that these gems falling from the lips of the people were not novelties. They were centuries old. Returning to Homer, I read him in a new light. He was a people's poet—aristocratic, no doubt, but belonging to an age in which class inequalities had not yet produced a cultural cleavage between the hut and the castle. His language was artificial, yet strange to say, this artificiality was natural. It was the language of the people raised to a higher power. No wonder they flocked to hear him.

the Iliad and Odyssey always chant to the lyre So the epics had once been songs

In the Odyssey four minstrel performances are described One is simply a lay chanted to the lyre Another is the same, but preceded by a dance which the minstrel accompanies on the lyre In the other two, while the minstrel is chanting, a chorus is dancing These songs had once been dances This is confirmed by an examination of the epic hexameter, which is probably founded on a couplet of the same type as we find in early Greek choral poetry

The evolution of minstrelsy is now clear It began with the primitive combination of leader and chorus, solo and refrain The leader and solo developed, the chorus and refrain died away Then the soloist discarded his instrument, and the song became a poem That is how epic came into being But what brought it into being?

Greek civilisation was founded on the ruins of an older civilisation, the Minoan, which collapsed under the blows of barbarian invaders from the Balkans When they first entered the Aegean, these northerners were still tribal, but the wealth which they piled up in raids and wars of conquest precipitated a crisis, out of which arose a small, energetic ruling class of military adventurers organised in quasi-feudal relationships under the kings established in the main strongholds of the conquered territory, such as Mycenae and Sparta This upheaval produced a new type of poet—a minstrel attached to the chief or king with the task of celebrating his military exploits, thereby enhancing his prestige, and the new type of poetry—the heroic lay—expressed the outlook of this new class—warlike, masculine, secular, individualistic, full of boundless vitality

Being dependent on warfare, these kingdoms did not last long They were overthrown by a fresh wave of invaders from the north Expelled from Mycenae and Sparta, the dispossessed dynasties fled with their retainers to the west coast of Asia Minor, where they re-established themselves, but with none of their former wealth and grandeur Their minstrels sang no longer of contemporary victories, because there were none to sing of They turned back to idealised memories of the past The Iliad and Odyssey began as loosely strung sequences of lays sung extempore at the courts of these petty princes descended from Agamemnon

and made in the same way, but in them the qualities inherent in improvised verse were nursed up to the point at which, without losing any of their spontaneity, they blossomed into art. And all this was rendered possible by a unique combination of historical circumstances, which laid a bridge between improvisation and composition, between speech and writing, so that something of the unpremeditated audacity of the primitive minstrel, inspired by the shining eyes and breathless silence of the crowd, was carried over into the impassive but durable medium of the written word

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Every minstrel with any skill at all always improvises, so that he cannot recite a song twice over in exactly the same form. But this does not mean that he composes a new poem each time. His procedure is like that of the pianist. As the pianist puts together in harmonious form various runs that are familiar to him, with transitions and motives according to the inspiration of the moment, and thus makes up the new out of the old, so also does the epic minstrel. Thanks to long practice, he has a whole series of 'elements of production', if I may so express it, which he puts together in suitable form according to the course of the narrative. These consist of pictures of certain events and situations, such as the birth of a hero, his upbringing, the glories of weapons, preparations for fighting, the storm of battle, the conversation of a hero before battle, portraits of people and horses, praise of the beauty of a bride. His art consists in piecing together these static components as circumstances require and connecting them with lines invented for the occasion. These formative elements can be used in very different ways. He knows how to sketch a picture in a few strokes, or paint it more thoroughly, or elaborate all the details with epic fullness. The more of these elements he has at his command, the greater the diversity of his performance, the greater his power to sing on and on without tiring his audience. He can sing for a day, a week, or a month, just as he can talk, and narrate all the time³⁸.

In verse words are arranged in artificial patterns, and, if the minstrel is as fluent in this medium as he is in common speech, it is because he has at his disposal a repertoire of traditional formulations covering all the themes incidental to his subject, all the prescribed rituals and procedures of social life. These are part of his craft. The epic style is facile just because it is so formal. Its highly conventional character is due to its origin in improvisation. That is the secret of the minstrel's art. Conversely, the sophisticated poet has lost the gift of improvisation, but meanwhile he has acquired the power of individualising his medium and so become a conscious artist.

These features of the epic style are universal. Just as the social setting of these Kirghiz khans reappears in the palace of Odysseus, so their use of language is echoed in the *Odyssey*. Or, if we compare Greek epic with Germanic, we find the same stock of static

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The conditions in which the Germanic lays were written down were much less favourable, and so it is probable that their inferiority to Homer is due largely to losses in transmission. The spread of literacy during the so-called Dark Ages was a very slow business, and for a long time it was confined to Latin. In western Europe, moreover, popular poetry, being pagan, was discouraged. 'When priests dine together', wrote Alcuin to the Bishop of Lindisfarne, 'let the words of God be read. It is fitting on such occasions to listen to a reader, not a harper, to the discourses of the Fathers, not the poems of the heathen. What has Ingeld to do with Christ?'⁴⁰ The Homeridae were honoured guests at Court and acknowledged authorities in sacred lore. They had these decisive advantages over the *jongleur* and the *scop*.

Were the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* composed by a single author, or were they compiled out of shorter lays by many authors? This is the famous Homeric Question, over which classical scholars, divided irreconcilably into 'unitarians' and 'separatists', have battled for a hundred and fifty years. The answer is, neither. All theories of authorship, single or composite, are beside the point. The concept of authorship is inapplicable. These poems took shape out of a kaleidoscopic background of impromptu variations adjusted to the inspiration of the moment, crystallising gradually as the power of improvisation failed, and then they were brought to rest so gently that in their final configuration the simple realism and natural eloquence of primitive, popular poetry was blended with the subtle, self-critical individualism of mature art. From the nature of the case they could not have been produced either by a single artist or by a succession of artists working separately for their own ends. They were the work of a school in which generations of disciplined and devoted masters and pupils had given their lives to perfecting their inheritance. The best of these were creative artists, yet even these exercised their originality in refining and harmonising the traditional material rather than in making any radical innovations. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are made of the same stuff as primitive epics,

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V THE EVOLUTION OF DRAMA

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The final step in the evolution of Greek drama was taken at the end of the sixth century. The Athenian tyrants had brought these Dionysiac mysteries to town, built a theatre for them, and reorganised them. Then the tyranny was overthrown. The merchant class was now strong enough to rule in its own right and introduced a democratic constitution. A few years later the dramatic festival was reconstructed on a grander scale than before. By this time Aeschylus was just twenty-one. And so, looking back over the rise of Athens and the rise of drama, we can say definitely that Athenian drama was a product of the democratic revolution.

Now turn to our own country. Down to the twelfth century the economy was based on the feudal manor—a self-contained unit composed of the feudal lord, his serfs, and a limited number of artisans. Just as the serf was subject to the lord of the manor, so the lord owed certain services to the baron, and the baron to the king. The feudal system was a hierarchy of hereditary degrees. Then came the development of commodity production, which promoted the growth of towns, controlled by the bourgeois guilds, and the revival of navigation and international trade, leading to the discovery of America. Being incompatible with commodity production, the feudal system was destroyed and replaced by the capitalist system. This was the bourgeois revolution. The period with which we are immediately concerned is the sixteenth century, when the Tudors established an absolute monarchy supported by the bourgeoisie. This was the period in which English drama emerged as an art form.

The germ of the medieval mystery plays, according to Chambers, was the *Quem quaeritis* of the Easter liturgy, which was expanded by dramatising other incidents in the Easter myth—the meeting of the three Marias with the angel, with the Apostles, and with Christ himself⁴². Why did the liturgy burst into drama? Probably the impulse to dramatisation came in the first instance from the peasantry, who sought instinctively to turn the ritual into something useful—into magic. Outside the Church, dramatic ritual still survived in their mumming plays and seasonal festivals, inherited from their pre-Christian ancestors. The Germanic peoples are known to have had secret cult-societies of the same general type as we find in ancient Greece. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, the mystery plays were transferred from the cathedral to the market-place—taken over from the clergy by the guilds.

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This agrarian ritual centres in the figure of a king, who after reigning for a prescribed period is put to death. The explanation of this remarkable custom is that ritual of this kind goes back to a time when the kings had been mere servants of the royal women, the queens, whose control of this all-important ritual gave them a correspondingly high status in society. They had to conceive in order that the earth might become fruitful. They conceived from a god incarnate in the king, who after serving his purpose was killed, because being divine he was immortal. All over the Near East, long after this custom had been abolished, memories

VI TRAGEDY

TRAGEDY is a specifically European form of drama. It appears first in ancient Athens, and again in western Europe with the rise of the modern bourgeoisie. Elizabethan tragedy is almost entirely independent of Greek influence, yet it reveals those features which are regarded by general consent as essentially tragic.

We are so used to a monetary economy that it is hard for us to realise the effect it had on men's minds when it was first introduced. I will begin by referring to Aristotle's remarks on the subject⁴⁴

The original function of money, he says, was simply to facilitate the process of exchange—selling in order to buy. The peasant takes his pig to market, sells it, and with the money thus acquired he buys a suit of clothes. So long as it was confined to this purpose, the circulation of money was merely a means to an end—the satisfaction of immediate needs. But in time it came to be used for a new purpose—buying in order to sell. The merchant buys cheap in order to sell dear. He buys up some commodity, thereby forcing up the price, and then sells at a profit. Money-making has now become an end in itself. Having done it once, he does it again. As an Athenian poet said, riches have no limit. The merchant goes on and on reinvesting his capital, until eventually—perhaps because other merchants have been playing the same game—he overreaches himself and is ruined. Aristotle drives the point home by quoting the story of Midas. Midas was king of Phrygia, a country rich in gold-mines. He expressed the wish that he might have the power to turn everything he touched into gold. His wish was granted, and he died of hunger—starved in the midst of his gold.

This tendency, according to Aristotle, is inherent in a monetary economy. The social and moral effects of the introduction of money can be traced quite plainly in Greek literature.

Under the landed aristocracy social relations had been simple, direct, and definite. There was nothing mysterious about them. The exploitation of the peasantry took the concrete form of tribute in labour or in kind. Not only was the peasant personally acquainted with his lord, but so had their fathers been for generations back. They might even be quite intimate together, like Odysseus and his swineherd in the *Odyssey*. The outlook of this

V THE EVOLUTION OF DRAMA

DRAMA involves action, impersonation. It is inherently mimetic. And in Greek drama there is a chorus—a group of persons who sing and dance. In structure, therefore, it is less highly differentiated, more primitive, than epic. It bears on the face of it the marks of its origin in magic. Nevertheless, as an art form, it belongs to a later phase of class society.

The primitive mimetic dance was, as we have seen, a sort of rehearsal for the real task. At this stage the relationship between the make-believe and the reality was simple. But, as technique improved, the rehearsal became superfluous, and then the dance tended to lose its connection with the labour process. It was adapted to new functions, social rather than economic. Moreover, as labour became more specialised, magic itself became a specialised occupation. The dance ceased to be a rehearsal and became a rite, performed under the supervision of the magicians or priests, still regarded as necessary for the people's welfare, but divorced from the labour of production.

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And this again from Sophokles

*A man ill-formed by nature and ill-spoken,
Money shall make him fair to eye and ear
Wealth, health and happiness are all the gift of money,
And money alone can hide iniquity*

And so we find the same poet denouncing money as the root of all evil.

*Of all the foul growths current in the world,
The worst is money Money drives men from home,
Plunders proud cities, and perverts honest minds
To shameful practice, godlessness and crime*

Money transformed everything into its opposite As it spread, penetrating every pore of society with its subversive influence, men came to perceive that this new thing they had invented had become their master, and since they were unable to understand it or control it, they could only explain it by idealising it as a universal law. Hence the idea, which we meet over and over again in Greek literature, that the excessive pursuit, not only of wealth, but of health, happiness, everything, however good and desirable in itself, is liable to produce its opposite. As Plato said.

In the seasons of the year, in the life of plants, in the human body, and above all in civil society, excessive action results in a violent transformation into its opposite.

In his treatise on the art of poetry Aristotle defines tragedy as a representation of an action involving a reversal of fortune brought about by some error on the part of the protagonist This reversal of fortune is, or tends to be, catastrophic it is, in his own words, 'a transformation of the action into its opposite'. A plot based on this principle is essentially tragic The finest example is the *King Oedipus* of Sophokles

Laios and Jocasta were king and queen of Thebes To the south of Thebes lies Corinth, to the west, the Delphic Oracle of Apollo, on whose temple were engraved the words, 'Know Thyself' A son was born to them, Oedipus, of whom the Oracle predicted that he would murder his father and marry his mother. Rather than rear such a child, they gave it to one of their men-servants with instructions that it was to be left to perish in the hills The man-servant, a shepherd, took pity on it and gave it to another shepherd, a Corinthian, who took it home with him The King and Queen of Corinth were childless, so they reared it as their own.

have already mentioned what the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos did for epic. He did even more for drama.

At Corinth, early in the sixth century, a poet patronised by the tyrant of that city evolved from the ritual of Dionysus a new type of choral performance, called the dithyramb. It was probably based on a processional, the leader chanting the stanzas, the chorus providing the refrain. The ritual act has become a hymn, the priest a poet, and his votaries a chorus.

A little later something similar happened at Athens, perhaps under Corinthian influence. In his account of Athenian drama Aristotle says that tragedy evolved from the improvisations of the leaders of the dithyramb. What he means is this. The nucleus of tragedy was the dithyrambic chorus, and this nucleus was expanded by transforming the leader of the chorus into an actor—first one actor, then two, then three. How was this transformation effected?

The Greek word for 'actor' means properly 'interpreter'. If the dithyramb originated as a choral celebration of the fate of Dionysus performed by a secret society, it is plain that, when it came to be performed in public, it would need to be interpreted. Let us imagine that such a society is performing a dance in which the god's death is enacted. The performers understand what the dance means, but the spectators do not. Accordingly, at some point their leader—priest or poet—comes forward and says in so many words, 'I am Dionysus', explaining the story to the uninitiated. In doing this he is already an interpreter, and he is on the way to becoming an actor.

Aristotle tells us that Greek tragedy began with only one actor, and he adds that in early days the part was taken by the poet himself. This completes our sequence: priest—poet—actor. The priest had been possessed, the poet was inspired, and down to the last days of Greek drama a certain sanctity attached to members of the acting profession. Why? Their sanctity flowed from their origin. They were vehicles for expressing what had once been the voice of a god. The actor who declaimed the part which the poet had composed for him was descended from the poet-actor, and the poet-actor, who spoke his own part—improvised, inspired—was descended through the poet-leader of the dithyramb from the priest of Dionysus, who, since the god had entered his body and possessed him, was the god.

robbers. The road to Delphi—Oedipus remembered. But a band of robbers—he had been travelling alone. Jocasta assured him that the second point could be proved by sending for the sole survivor—the old shepherd in the hills. This Oedipus instructed her to do, in the hope that his evidence would clear him.

At this juncture a messenger arrived from Corinth with the news that the king of that city was dead and that Oedipus had been appointed to succeed him. Oedipus was now at the height of fortune—king of two cities. Jocasta acclaimed the news as proof that the old prophecy was false. His father had died a natural death. Reassured on that point, Oedipus insisted that he would never return to Corinth for fear of marrying his mother. Then, eager to reassure him on this point too, the messenger explained that he was not their true son but a foundling. Meanwhile the old shepherd had arrived. He recognised the messenger from Corinth as the shepherd he had met long ago in the hills. He did his best to evade the king's questions, but he was forced to answer by threats of torture. The truth was out at last. Oedipus rushed into the palace and put out his eyes with a brooch torn from the body of his mother, who had already hanged herself.

This outcast who became a king, this king who became an outcast, has twice become the opposite of what he was. And the transformation has been effected against the intention, yet through the unconscious agency, of the persons concerned. The child was exposed to avert the prophecy, and the shepherd saved it out of pity, with the result that Oedipus grew up without knowing who he was. When doubt was cast on his parentage, he consulted the Oracle. When the Oracle revealed his destiny, he fled from it along the road to Thebes. He killed his father in self-defence. The shepherd recognised him, but said nothing, and so left him free to marry his mother. When the Oracle demanded the expulsion of the murderer, he led the search himself. Teiresias would not have denounced him if he had not denounced Teiresias. That was the error that brought about his fall, and yet this error was only the excess of his greatest quality—his zeal in the service of his people. And finally the old shepherd, summoned to disprove the charge that he had killed his father, played into the hands of the Corinthian messenger, who by seeking to relieve him of the fear of marrying his mother proved that what he feared to do he had already done. This persistent transmutation of intentions into

In this way they were secularised. After that their development was so rapid that the intermediate links are not all clear, but one thing stands out. The Tudors brought them to Court. The King's Players, as they were called, were part of the royal household. These were professionals. In addition, amateur performances—revels, interludes, pageants—were very popular. Sir Thomas More made his mark as a page at Court by composing plays in which he sometimes took part himself. 'At Christmastide he would suddenly step in among the players and never studying for the matter make a part of his own there presently among them' ⁴³.

So we see that in certain respects there is a parallel between the Athenian democratic revolution and the English bourgeois revolution. Both marked the transition from a simple agricultural to a monetary economy, both were accompanied by the growth of a new art—the drama. But of course there were also fundamental differences. In the one case the basis was slave labour, in the other wage labour. Ancient democracy was confined to a small corner of the Mediterranean. Its scale was minute, and it was all over in a century and a half. Modern capitalism, on the other hand, expanded right across Europe, colonised America, Australia, conquered India and Africa, until after five centuries it has covered the whole world and transformed the lives of the whole human race. The level is higher and the scale incomparably vaster.

These differences are reflected in the drama. In Greek drama there is a chorus. This is a primitive feature. In Elizabethan drama it has disappeared. Greek drama was never completely secularised, and tragedy in particular preserved the grave formality appropriate to a liturgy. The masterpieces of Aeschylus and Sophokles are perfect in artistic design. Some of Shakespeare's are chaotic by comparison. They have a wild, tumultuous vitality—like a Gothic cathedral as compared with the Parthenon. They are the work of a larger, richer, swifter society—more enterprising, more adventurous, with wider horizons.

So much for the differences. In the next chapter we shall concentrate on what the two arts have in common.

freedom granted to those who trade in it?'⁴⁹ America had been discovered, and from America flowed gold. There was no limit to the power of gold. Read the words of Columbus

Gold constitutes treasure, and he who possesses it has all he needs in this world as also the means of rescuing souls from Purgatory and restoring them to the enjoyment of Paradise⁵⁰
Or listen to the Jew of Malta counting over his bales.

*Thus trolls our fortune in by land and sea,
And thus are men on every side enrich'd
What more may heaven do for earthly man
Than thus to pour out plenty in their laps,
Ripping the bowels of the earth for them,
Making the seas their servants, and the winds
To drive their substance with successful blasts⁵¹*

Faustus had sold his soul, but he got good value for it

*How am I glutted with conceit of this!
Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
Resolve me of all ambiguities,
Perform what desperate enterprise I will?
I'll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates⁵²*

That is one side of the picture. We must not forget the other—the thousands of peasant families evicted by the Enclosure Acts, thrown out on to the roads, and there pursued by the Vagrancy Acts to prison or the gallows. This is how they are described by Sir Thomas More

The husbandmen be thrust out of their own, or else by coveyn and fraud and by violent oppression they be put besides it, or by wrongs and injuries they be so wearied, that they be compelled to sell all, by one means therefore or by other, by hook or by crook, they must needs depart away, poor silly wretched souls, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woful mothers with their young babes. Away they trudge, I say, out of their known and accustomed houses, finding no place to rest in. All their household stuff, which is very little worth, though it might well abide the sale, yet being suddenly thrust out, they be constrained to sell it for a thing of naught. And when they have wandered abroad till that be spent, what can they then else do but steal, and then justly pardy be hanged, or else go about abegging, and yet then also

period is expressed by Hesiod, a yeoman farmer, whose attitude to the peasantry is at once protective and repressive. He warns the nobles not to abuse their privileges, he urges the peasants to make the best of their lot. Nothing too much, rest content with what you have, if you seek more than your measure, you will be punished for your arrogance.

All this was destroyed by money. Without money, the brilliant city rebuilt by Peisistratos would never have arisen, there would have been no democracy, no Oresteia, no Parthenon. But if Athenian democracy was brought into being by money, it was destroyed by the same cause. Faced with the competition of slave labour, which was increasing rapidly, the poorer citizens used their newly won democratic rights to force their leaders to support them on what were in effect doles, and the leaders met the cost in the only way they could meet it, without expropriating the rich—by exploiting other peoples. Athens became an aggressive imperialist power, attempting to preserve her democracy by the negation of democracy, until eventually it was destroyed. Such was the destructive contradiction that troubled the minds of thoughtful men, consciously and unconsciously.

'Man is money.' That was a saying in one of the first cities to strike a coinage. There is nothing money cannot buy, there is nothing the man with money cannot become. Sophokles says the same.

*Money wins friendship, honour, place, and power,
And sets man next to the proud tyrant's throne
All trodden paths and paths untrod before
Are scaled by nimble riches, where the poor
Can never hope to win the heart's desire*

A later poet set money above God.

*I say, the only serviceable gods
Are gold and silver. With these in your house
Ask what you will, and everything shall be yours—
Friends, judges, witnesses, all yours for money
Why, even the gods shall be your ministers*

It was therefore a subversive force, turning all social distinctions, all moral values, upside down. This is from Euripides.

*Riches surround the slave with the highest honours,
While poverty steals freedom from the free*

and with the accession of James I it ceased definitely to be the focus of bourgeois culture. The change had a profound effect on Shakespeare. All his great tragedies were written under the new regime. In *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* he is subconsciously, but plainly, preoccupied with the issue, raised by James I in his struggle against the bourgeoisie, of the divine right of kings, in *Coriolanus* he voices his fear of the forces which, if it is to overthrow the monarchy, the bourgeoisie will have to call into action. A fresh cleavage has arisen, and this time, being bound to the Court by his vocation and the habits of a lifetime, he finds himself on the losing side. The result is that in these years his conscious attitude becomes increasingly conservative.

*Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows! Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe,
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead,
Force should be right, or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite,
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And, last, eat up himself⁶⁵*

All this—or nearly all—is traditional. The idea of degree as the only alternative to chaos was a commonplace⁶⁶. I need only quote from Elyot's *Governor*, published many years before

Take away order from all things, what should then remain?
Certes, nothing finally, except some man would imagine
eftsoons chaos

But the passage is not merely derivative. Shakespeare is doing what all poets are always doing—starting with a conscious statement and then flying off into fantasy. *Take but degree away*. That is a fully conscious statement. It means: if you abolish the feudal system, you will have chaos. It is a straightforward expression of

Twenty years later the young Oedipus was taunted with not being the true son of his supposed parents. They tried to reassure him without revealing the truth, but he was not satisfied, so he went to Delphi and consulted the Oracle. The only reply he got was a repetition of the old prophecy, of which he heard now for the first time, that he was destined to murder his father and marry his mother. Resolving never to set foot in Corinth again, he turned in the opposite direction—the road to Thebes. At this time the Thebans were suffering from the ravages of the Sphinx, a female monster which took a daily toll of human life till someone could be found to answer the riddle she had set them. Laios was now on his way to Delphi to consult the Oracle about it. He was driving a chariot, and one of his attendants was his man-servant, the shepherd. Meeting Oedipus, he tried to force him off the track. Oedipus resisted. Laios struck at him with his whip. Oedipus struck back and killed him. He killed the attendants too—all except the shepherd, who took to his heels and brought back to Thebes the panic-stricken story that the King had been murdered on the road to Delphi by a band of robbers.

Oedipus reached Thebes, and the first thing he did was to read the riddle of the Sphinx. Acclaiming him as their deliverer, the grateful people made him king. At this point the shepherd, who had recognised him but had decided to keep the truth to himself, obtained leave from Jocasta to spend the rest of his days in retirement in the hills. The new king married the widowed queen. Years passed, and children were born to them. Then the Thebans were again afflicted, this time with a plague. Determined not to fail them, Oedipus sent a special emissary to consult the Oracle. The reply was that the plague would cease when the murderer of Laios was expelled. The search for the unknown criminal was led by Oedipus, who pronounced a curse on him.

There was one other besides the shepherd who knew the truth—the aged prophet Teiresias, and he too had decided to keep it dark. Questioned by Oedipus, he refused to answer. Oedipus lost his temper. Then Teiresias lost his temper too and denounced Oedipus as the murderer. Oedipus flew into a passion and accused Teiresias of conspiring against the throne. The quarrel was brought to an end by the intervention of Jocasta. In reply to her husband's questions, she told him what she knew of the death of Laios: he had been murdered on the road to Delphi by a band of

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their opposites is the dominating motive of the tragedy, carried on to the catastrophe with the terrifying automatism of a dream

How the feudal system was destroyed by the power of money has been described by Marx

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors' and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest—callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egoistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless, indefeasible chartered freedoms it has set up that single unconscionable freedom—free trade.⁴⁵

But let the writers of the time speak for themselves

The feudal conception of society was summed up in the word degree. There are constant allusions to it in the writings of the medieval schoolmen

I wot well that there is degree above degree, as reason is, and skill it is that men do their devoir thereas it is due, but certes, extortions and despite of your underlings is damnable.⁴⁶

This was the age in which society was cemented by the personal bond of allegiance and liberality between peasant and lord

*O good old man, how well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world,
When service sweat for duty, not for meed.⁴⁷*

These feudal relations were broken up by commodity production

*That smooth-fac'd gentleman, tickling commodity
Commodity, the bias of the world
The world, who of itself is poised well,
Made to run even, upon even ground,
Till this advantage, this vile drawing bias,
This sway of motion, this commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent.⁴⁸*

laborate hierarchy of degrees and devoirs, sanctified and ecclesiastical authority, was torn down
enterpriser can deny', the citizens of
tried to place restrictions
erity of this city is the

*Be not disturbed with my infirmity
If you be pleas'd, retire into my cell,
And there repose, a turn or two I'll walk,
To still my beating mind*

The Tempest has been described as 'an irresponsible play of poetic fancy'⁶⁸ And so it is—irresponsible in so far as it is independent of the poet's consciousness and for that reason all the more responsive to the strivings of his subconscious self, set in motion by the under-currents flowing deep down beneath the sparkling surface of Elizabethan life

VII THE FUTURE

UNDER capitalism the social status of the poet has changed Shakespeare was attached to the Earl of Leicester. Although a bourgeois in origin and outlook, his status was feudal Milton, on the other hand, was for many years a Commonwealth official, and foreign secretary to Cromwell His status was bourgeois. But there was the closest union between his politics and his poetry. Politics, poetry, religion were for him one and indivisible After the Restoration there was a partial return to the semi-feudal conditions of patronage Poets like Pope and Gay enjoyed the hospitality of the landed gentry, who subscribed to their poems and employed them as secretaries But with the Industrial Revolution all feudal survivals were finally swept away Poetry became a commodity, the poet a producer for the open market, and with a decreasing demand for his wares During the past half-century capitalism has ceased to be a progressive force, the bourgeoisie has ceased to be a progressive class, and so bourgeois culture, including poetry, is losing its vitality. Our contemporary poetry is not the work of the ruling class—what does big business care about poetry?—but of a small and isolated section of the community, the middle-class intelligentsia, spurned by the ruling class but still hesitating to join hands with the masses of the people, the proletariat, who alone have the strength to break through the iron ring of monopoly capitalism And so bourgeois poetry has lost touch with the underlying forces of social change. Its range has contracted—the range of its content and the range of its appeal It is no longer the work of a people, or even of a class, but of a coterie Unless the bourgeois poet can learn to

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This sway of motion, this commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent*⁴⁸

The whole elaborate hierarchy of degrees and devoirs, sanctified by ancestral custom and ecclesiastical authority, was torn down in the name of free enterprise 'Who can deny', the citizens of Antwerp protested to Philip II when he tried to place restrictions on their trade, 'that the cause of the prosperity of this city is the

writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender, so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the spring-time of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks

Yeats was conscious of it too

*Though the great song return no more,
There's keen delight in what we have
The rattle of pebbles on the shore
Under the receding wave*⁶⁹

But Yeats divined that the spring-time would return His prediction is made in a little poem entitled *At Galway Races*⁷⁰ I remember Galway Races—the country gentry, the sideshows, the tinkers, the peasants with their white bauncens and bright red petticoats, trooping on to the racecourse or stopping to listen to a ragged ballad-singer at the roadside—a festival more medieval than modern Here is the poem

*There where the course is,
Delight makes all of the one mind,
The riders upon the galloping horses,
The crowd that closes in behind
We too had good attendance once,
Hearers and hearteners of the work,
Aye, horsemen for companions,
Before the merchant and the clerk
Breathed on the world with timid breath
Sing on somewhere, at some new moon,
We'll learn that sleeping is not death,
Hearing the whole earth change its tune,
Its flesh being wild, and it again
Crying aloud as the racecourse is,
And we find hearteners among men
That ride upon horses*

Will this prophecy come true? For many years I wrestled with this question as a practical issue I was working to save the culture of the Irish-speaking peasantry In that I was unsuccessful I failed

Othello, his life in ruins, is confronted with Iago, who has ruined it, and asks

*Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my mind and body?*⁶²

Why indeed? Many critics have asked this question Coleridge said it was 'motiveless malignity' Psychologically this is hardly convincing, so it does not satisfy those who believe that Shakespeare was absorbed in the characterisation of individuals rather than in the seething social life of his time I believe that Coleridge is right Though clothed in a human personality, Iago is essentially inhuman—a demi-devil, a symbol of destructiveness, whose real meaning comes out in his own words and actions

It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor—put money in thy purse—nor he his to her It was a violent commencement, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration—put but money in thy purse These Moors are changeable in their wills—fill thy purse with money the food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida She must change for youth when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice She must have change, she must therefore put money in thy purse⁶³

His plot turns on Cassio

*For whiles this honest fool
Pleads Desdemona to repair his fortunes,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,
That she repeals him for her body's lust,
And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all*⁶⁴

Iago is the demi-devil who transforms intentions into their opposites

Ever since he came to London Shakespeare had been fascinated by the brilliant culture radiating from the Elizabethan Court, although as a yeoman's son, he could not shut his eyes to the shadow that was spreading over the countryside He did well in London and made a comfortable fortune He was a bourgeois, pledged to the new order But for some years before the old Queen died the Court had been full of intrigues and the odour of decay,

imagination takes off, sustained by further allusions to traditional ideas, which need not be followed up now, and it ends in pure fantasy

*And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And, last, eat up himself*

What does this mean? I do not suppose Shakespeare knew himself, because it is poetry—a vision expressed in symbols. It means, if we are to analyse it, that the system which is replacing feudalism, being based on unrestricted competition, will expand to the limits of expansion and then turn inwards and destroy itself. And that is what has happened. We have seen it happen in our own lifetime.

Did Shakespeare see further than that? It is hard to say, but in his last years he gave up tragedy and wrote *The Tempest*, in which we are transported far away from bourgeois city life to a magic island, where the spirit Ariel, who has been promised his freedom after discharging his term of service, tames the forces of nature for his master's use, and the highest flight is reached in the fantastic masque performed for the betrothed couple

*Earth's increase, and founon plenty,
Barns and garners never empty,
Vines with clustering bunches growing,
Plants with goodly burden bowing,
Spring come to you at the farthest
In the very end of harvest!
Scarcity and want shall shun you,
Ceres' blessing so is on you."*

Whatever it is the old poet glimpses in this last flash of inspiration, the strain is too great—it is too far away, and the masquers are dismissed

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capt towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this unsubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vex'd,
Bear with my weakness, my old brain is troubled*

doggerel with which Paul Robeson and Bing Crosby have stirred the hearts of millions.

*Our country's strong, our country's young,
And her greatest songs are still unsung
Out of the cheating, out of the shouting,
Out of the murders and lynching,
Out of the windbags, the patriotic spouting,
Out of the uncertainty and doubting
It will come again,
Our marching song will come again,
Simple as a hit tune, deep as our valleys,
High as our mountains, strong as the people
who made it⁷³*

But how will it come in countries where popular poetry of the primitive sort is dead? In western Europe, apart from a few isolated pockets, pre-capitalist culture has perished, and so we cannot look for a renaissance of the same type. The only poetry in western Europe is bourgeois poetry. But it is the finest in the world. It is a magnificent heritage. But it is not being used. The first crying need is that this treasury should be thrown open to the people.

Why is it that the common people of this country have no use for Shakespeare? It is no reflection on Shakespeare, nor on themselves. It is a reflection on the contemporary bourgeoisie, who have befogged the work of their own greatest poet by breathing on it with their timid breath. Shakespeare held up a mirror to the bourgeoisie of his time, and what a portrait they saw there—gay, energetic, boisterous, fastidious, full of the effervescence of life. They dare not look in the mirror today. Shakespeare was in his time a revolutionary force. They dare not present him as that today. They are compelled to reduce him to their own stature—to restrict his appeal, and empty his work of its revolutionary content. Far away in the Tien Shan Mountains, the Kirghiz Republic, with a population not much bigger than Birmingham, can afford a national theatre. The British Government cannot. If our Government were really concerned to bring Shakespeare to the people, we should have a state-endowed Shakespeare theatre in every town, with special performances for schoolchildren. We all know how he is taught as a textbook in the schools, and remember, the vast majority of our children leave school at

reorientate his art, he will soon have nobody to sing to but himself. Shakespeare's masterpieces were written to be declaimed with voice and gesture before a crowd, sweeping a thousand heartstrings with the magic of a word. This has gone out of our poetry. Even Shakespeare is no longer a draw. I am not forgetting all that has been achieved in purely literary forms, such as Shakespeare's own Sonnets or Keats's Odes. But all poetry is in origin a social act, in which poet and people commune. Our poetry has been individualised to such a degree that it has lost touch with its source of life. It has withered at the root.

Homer stood near the beginning of class society. We stand near the end. In Homer's time poetry was still intensely popular, and in some ways still immature. In later Greece and again in Elizabethan England it attained its full stature, while still preserving a large measure of its popular appeal. Elizabethan poetry was inspired by the first achievements of the bourgeois revolution, which opened a new and dazzling future. It burst into fresh life, though on a more restricted scale, at the end of the eighteenth century, when the bourgeois revolution of this country was completed. But today the boughs of that majestic growth are shaking against the cold. The bourgeois forms have become 'classical'. They have grown stale, and our younger poets have discarded them. But they do not know where to turn for new forms. If they are to recover their power to inspire, they must seek inspiration from the people.

It is natural that Irish poets should feel very keenly the loss of their pre-capitalist status and their popular appeal, because in Ireland the bourgeois revolution was only completed in our own generation. It is still a tradition among the peasantry that the poet is a person to be treated with respect and always hospitably received. But the Irish peasantry is a dying class. Year by year the cream of its youth is being drained away by emigration. And its culture is dying too. Synge was conscious of this when he wrote the preface to his *Playboy of the Western World*.

All art is a collaboration, and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the storyteller's or the playwright's hand as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a

people and restored the broken harmony between poetry and life. Of course they were by no means the first English poets to be conscious revolutionaries. They were the heirs of William Morris, Shelley, Milton. Let me recall in conclusion Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*—a story which epitomises my argument.

Jupiter, king of the gods, had determined that mankind should perish. Man was saved by Prometheus, who gave him two gifts—fire, the source of all technical inventions, and hope, which prevented him from brooding on his mortal nature. Equipped with fire and inspired by hope, he survived and raised himself out of savagery into civilisation. Jupiter punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock, but in the end Jupiter was overthrown, Prometheus delivered, and the future of humanity assured.

It was the use of tools that enabled man to control fire, and it was the control of fire that enabled him to work metals, without which civilisation would have been impossible. So fire stands for science—for man's understanding and control of the objective laws governing him and his environment. Similarly, hope—the subjective factor of restless discontent which drives him on to deeper understanding and firmer control—corresponds to art. The artist is always striving after the impossible, like Goethe's Euphion, soaring into the sky until he bursts into flame and vanishes, but in the end, thanks to his inspiration, the baseless vision becomes a solid reality. The artist leads his fellow men into the world of fantasy, where they find release, thus asserting the refusal of the human consciousness to acquiesce in its environment, and by this means there is collected a hidden store of energy which flows back into the real world and transforms fantasy into fact. As a rule the artist himself is unaware of what he is doing, like a prophet who foresees more than he can understand, but sometimes his confidence emerges irrepressibly on to the plane of conscious thought. That is why at the end of his Choral Symphony Beethoven bursts into a song of joy addressed to the millions of mankind, and similarly in the *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley delineates quite clearly the free society of the future. Beethoven and Shelley were inspired by the French Revolution; but who can hear the Choral Symphony or *Prometheus Unbound* without awakening to a new sense of the revolutionary struggles that are sweeping the world today?

to see that you cannot raise the cultural standards of a people without raising their economic standards, and in concentrating on the Irish-speaking peasantry, who after all are only three hundred thousand souls, I failed to notice what was going on in the rest of the world

In the course of this essay I have referred several times to the peoples of Central Asia for illustrations of primitive poetry. The authorities I quoted from all dated from the Tsarist regime, when these peoples were sinking slowly to extinction in poverty and neglect, like the Irish peasantry. Let us see what has happened to them since 1917.

In 1913, 78 per cent of the population of the Russian Empire were unable to read or write. In 1936 that figure had been reduced to 8. In a population of over 150 millions, illiteracy has been all but wiped out in less than thirty years. That is an achievement without precedent in history. For the primitive peoples of Central Asia it means that economically, socially, culturally, they have ceased to be primitive. Take the Kazakh Republic, population six millions. Before 1917 only 6 per cent of the people lived in towns, today the urban population is 28 per cent. Or take the adjacent Kirghiz Republic, population one and a half million. Before 1917 the capital, Frunze, was a straggling hamlet. Today it is a well-laid-out city of a hundred thousand inhabitants, with an electric power station, a tractor repair plant, a large meat-packing combine, many light industries, hospitals, theatres and a university.

These peoples have ceased to be primitive. They have been industrialised. That is what happened to the English peasantry during the Industrial Revolution, and the result was that their culture was destroyed. That is what is happening to the Irish-speaking peasantry today, with the same result. What then is becoming of the culture of the Kazakhs and the Kirghiz and the other peoples of Soviet Asia? So far from being destroyed, it is bursting into new life, richer and more vigorous than ever before. The potentialities of this cultural renaissance are incalculable, and they will have repercussions all over the world.

Two things are happening. The first is that these peoples are avidly assimilating the classics of bourgeois European culture—poetry, drama, and the novel. Every one of these Republics has its national theatre, provided with the most up-to-date equipment

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Reprinting

AESCHYLUS AND ATHENS

Ready early in 1946

Union His name is Jamboul He was born in 1846—the oldest poet in the world Already before 1917 he was known throughout the steppes as the greatest bard of the Kazakhs, but his best work has been done since then It is reckoned that he has composed altogether about half a million verses, all improvised, but a great deal of what he composed before 1917 is now lost—forgotten by all concerned His more recent work includes a number of hymns celebrating the foundation of the Kazakh Republic, a poem for the centenary of Pushkin, another addressed to Maxim Gorky, and others to Lenin and Stalin Each poem is recorded as it is delivered by a special staff of secretaries He has a special physician, appointed by the Government, who resides permanently in his village, he is a member of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh S S R., and he is in receipt of a special life pension⁷² Here we have a primitive poet who had hardly lost his status under tribal society when he recovered it under socialism

These two developments—the absorption of bourgeois European culture and the revival of primitive Asiatic culture—are momentous in themselves, but it is only when we see them in combination as complementary aspects of a single movement that we can appreciate their full significance Hitherto bourgeois culture has always grown and spread at the expense of pre-capitalist culture In the conditions of capitalism, which turns the peasantry into proletarians, this was inevitable They could not live side by side But in Soviet Asia they are both flourishing and merging into a new culture which will preserve what capitalism has won and recover what it has lost—socialist culture And this is only the beginning To the south of the Soviet Union, with its 180 millions, lies India, with 375 millions, and China, with 450 millions When the peoples of India and China win their liberty, as they will soon, the same thing will happen there, and by that time the reawakening will have spread to more than half of the world's inhabitants

For these reasons I am confident that Yeats's prophecy will come true

*Sing on somewhere, at some new moon,
We'll learn that sleeping is not death,
Hearing the whole earth change its tune*

The great song will return—return on the lips of the people Yeats's prophecy is reaffirmed boldly, defiantly, in a piece of

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fourteen They do not even have the pleasure of studying Shakespeare for the School Certificate Instead of being set against the living background of Elizabethan England, he is presented as a vehicle for the enunciation of moral abstractions Was it for that the quick-witted, jostling London crowds packed into the Globe Theatre?

This, then, is the first need—to rescue our bourgeois heritage from the bourgeoisie, to take it over, reinterpret it, adapt it to our needs, renew its vitality by making it thoroughly our own But what of creative poetry? What aims should our young poets set themselves?

I have only two things to say on this head The first is that they must study poetry as a craft As Yeats used to say to the young poets that came to him for advice, 'You must learn your trade' They must emancipate themselves from the individualistic, impressionistic approach which dominates literary criticism today I am not denying that this approach has produced valuable results in the past, but it was always inadequate and now it is exhausted Literary criticism must be made scientific

As for the other, it will be enough to recall those haunting lines of Goethe

*Und wenn der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt,
Gab mir ein Gott, zu sagen, wie ich leide*

The poet speaks not for himself only but for his fellow-men His cry is their cry, which only he can utter That is what gives it its depth But if he is to speak for them, he must suffer with them, rejoice with them, work with them, fight with them Otherwise what he says will not appeal to them and so will lack significance The fruitfulness of this reorientation is especially apparent in those countries which have been subjected to the Nazi terror Before the war French poetry had the same general character as our own, but during these last years French poets have been active in the resistance movement and their work has been published in the underground press The best-known in this country is Aragon, who began as a surrealist and became a communist. A similar change has begun here Two of our most promising young poets, Christopher Caudwell and John Cornford, died fighting fascism in Spain, and anyone who reads their poetry can see what it was that compelled them to do what they did By their actions they surmounted the barrier between poetry and the

people and restored the broken harmony between poetry and life. Of course they were by no means the first English poets to be conscious revolutionaries. They were the heirs of William Morris, Shelley, Milton. Let me recall in conclusion Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*—a story which epitomises my argument.

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- 42 E K' Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (1903) (Page 39)
- 43 Quoted by Chambers, vol 11, p 193 (Page 40)
- 44 See my *Aeschylus and Athens*, ch xviii (Page 41)
- 45 From *The Communist Manifesto* (Page 46)
- 46 Chaucer, *Parson's Tale*, 763 (Page 46)
- 47 Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 11 3 (Page 46)
- 48 *King John*, 11 2 (Page 46)
- 49 Quoted by R H Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), p 74 (Page 47)
- 50 Quoted by Tawney, p 89 (Page 47)
- 51 Marlowe, *Jew of Malta* (Everyman ed), p 165 (Page 47)
- 52 Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, p 123 (Page 47)
- 53 *Utopia* (Everyman ed), p 24 (Page 48)
- 54 *King Lear*, 111 4 (Page 48)
- 55 *Utopia*, p 113 (Page 48)
- 56 Tawney, pp 87-8 (Page 48)
- 57 *Timon of Athens*, 1v 3 (Page 48)
- 58 *Timon*, 1v 1 (Page 49)
- 59 *Lear*, 1 2 (Page 49)
- 60 *Lear*, 1 1 (Page 49)
- 61 *Lear*, 1v 6 (Page 49)
- 62 *Othello*, v 2 (Page 50)
- 63 *Othello*, 1 3 (Page 50)
- 64 *Othello*, 11 3 (Page 50)
- 65 *Troilus and Cressida*, 1 3 (Page 51)
- 66 See E M W Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942) and *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944), where many more illustrations are given. What Tillyard presents as a static Elizabethan view of the world is really the ideology of feudalism in disruption. This has been shown by Tawney, whose work Tillyard does not mention (Page 51)
- 67 *Tempest*, 1v 1 (Page 52)
- 68 S Lee, *Life of William Shakespeare* (1898), p 256 (Page 53)
- 69 *Collected Poems* (1933), p 271 (Page 55)
- 70 *Collected Poems*, p 108 (Page 55)
- 71 J Macleod, *The New Soviet Theatre* (1943) (Page 57)
- 72 Jamboul died on 22 June 1945, and received a state funeral, the biggest ever seen in Alma Ata. A valedictory song was chanted by his oldest pupil and caught up by other minstrels among the crowd (Page 58)
- 73 From *A Ballad for Americans* (Page 59)
- 74 *Prometheus Unbound*, 111 4 (Page 62)

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